Wendlebury (Alchester fortress): two tombstones, the first known life story of a pre-medieval inhabitant of Oxfordshire (SP 571 203) and a geophysical survey south of the town (Centred around SP 572 200)

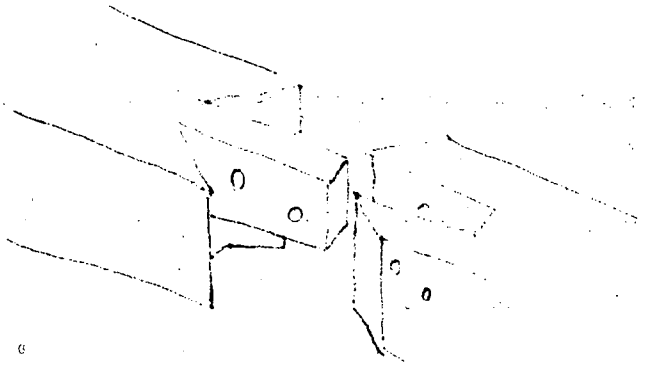

Fig 35. Type 2 scarf joint in wall-plate (exploded – conjectural).

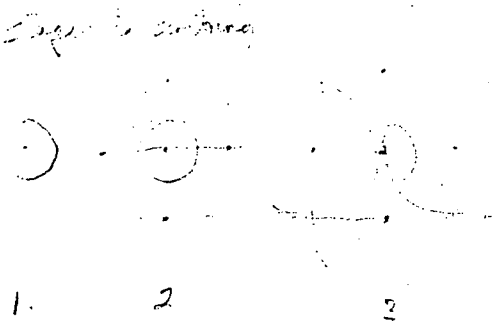

Fig 36. Conjectural development of scribed mark on truss C (Heather Horner).

Wallingford, land to the rear of the Old Post Office, Church Lane
Stephen Hammond and Andy Taylor

A variety of medieval and post-medieval deposits were encountered during the excavation of foundation pads, adding to the information recorded during an earlier evaluation (*SMA* 34). Most of these were left preserved *in situ*, as the foundation depth did not threaten them. A complete absence of finds from the 14th to 16th centuries reinforces the impression that this site witnessed a decline, consistent with most of the rest of the town in this period.

Wallingford, 6A St John's Road (SU 60593 89103)
A second stage evaluation (first stage in *SMA* 34) again revealed a ditch aligned east-to-west, and a dump of clean clay interleaved with gravel, which seems to have been deposited after the ditch had passed out of use. Again these features cannot be dated (a single fragment of medieval tile and two fragments of animal bone were the only finds) but they are no longer thought so likely to be elements of the Saxon *burh* defences, although this interpretation is not wholly precluded.

Wallingford, 33 Croft Road (SU 6040 8935)
Pamela Jenkins

A substantial ditch and bank were observed in a watching brief. Aligned north-to-south, it is possible that these relate to the Anglo-Saxon *burh* defences, but no dating evidence was retrieved. A further ditch or pit was also partially observed; this contained animal bone and charcoal remains undated.

Woodstock, land at the rear of the Punchbowl Inn, Oxford Road (SP 44650 16725)
Andy Taylor

No archaeological finds or deposits were encountered in a watching brief.

Publications:
Ford, S and Howell, I, 2004, 'Saxon and Bronze Age settlement at the Orchard site, Walton Road, Walton, Aylesbury, 1994' in S Ford, K Taylor and I Howell, 2004, The archaeology of the Aylesbury-Chalgrove pipeline and a Saxon site at The Orchard, Walton, TVAS monograph **5**, 60–88

Pine, J, 2004, 'Excavation of part of a 3rd-century Roman settlement and later Roman road at Stowford Road, Barton, Oxford', Oxoniensia, **LXVIII** (for 2003), 263–77

Pine, J and Ford, S, 2004, 'Excavation of Neolithic, late Bronze Age, early Iron Age and early Saxon features at St Helen's Avenue, Benson, Oxfordshire, Oxoniensia **LXVIII** (for 2003), 132–78

UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

Wendlebury (Alchester fortress): two tombstones, the first known life story of a pre-medieval inhabitant of Oxfordshire (SP 571 203) and a geophysical survey south of the town (centred around SP 572 200)

Eberhard Sauer

The tombstones from the town wall foundations
Only briefly mentioned in the last issue (*SMA* 34, 2004: 83), the 2003 season has yielded one most exceptional discovery: we found a tombstone, broken into 20 recovered fragments, embedded in the rubble foundations of the Alchester town wall (Fig 37). The fragments were spread over an area of 2.03m (north-south) by 3.14m (west-east) and their individual discovery, recording and recovery took 19 working days between 27 August and 14 September 2003.

The road leading through the gate survived. The gate opening was 2.95m wide, corresponding roughly to ten Roman feet. There were no traces of a widening of the foundations (if one excludes a single irregular 0.4m wide and 2.20m long buttress on the outside [west] of the town wall from 2 to 4.4m north of the gate opening). This suggests that the gate had not been provided with any massive flanking towers which would have required wider foundations than the town wall (whose width was on average *c* 3m).

Since fragments of the tombstone were found in the buttress and main foundations alike (though the three largest were deliberately placed in the buttress), we may conclude that they are contemporary. Sections through the foundations and the buttress further demonstrated that they had been built at the same time and that we are not dealing with any later modification. Preliminary investigations of finds embedded in an artificial berm for the town wall suggest

Alchester. The same is true for the Dorset hillforts. We cannot be sure whether they were amongst the over 20 native strongholds, *oppida*, Vespasian was said to have conquered, but, if so, they certainly would not have been too far to be conquered in a summer campaign by a legion based at Alchester. Whether or not Vespasian's operations extended into the territory of the Durotriges in Dorset and Somerset, there is no necessity any longer to continue to search for Vespasian's legionary base south of the Thames, where generations have searched for it in vain. In the light of the new evidence, it seems more likely that it was north of the Thames, at Alchester.

The geophysical survey

In 2004 the Alchester project carried out extensive resistivity and magnetometer surveys covering most of the western half of the meadow south of the town, as well as smaller areas in the east of the field south-west of the town. The main aim of these surveys was to establish whether or not there were any military ditches in this area. The position of the granary (Fig 39), cut by the later town wall foundations (*SMA* 34, 2004: 80 Fig 15), indicates almost certainly that the southern ditches of the main fortress must be outside the circuit of the later town walls. The two linear low resistance features, previously tentatively identified as possible south ditches of the fortress (*SMA* 34, 2004: 79 Fig 14), were picked up again (fig 40), but the southern one does not continue to the west beyond a T-junction with a north-south running linear feature, while its northern counterpart continues in a straight line, and does not curve to the north. The hypothesis that they might form part of a military double-ditch at the south side of the fortress can thus no longer be maintained. However, a straight linear positive magnetic anomaly was detected (Fig. 39), running from SP 457136 220051 to SP 457214 220062 (either point coinciding with the edge of the area explored by magnetometer survey). It would be in a perfect position for the outer ditch of the main fortress, but the question whether this is the correct interpretation or whether it may be a later ditch (eg of the Roman civilian period), can only be resolved by excavation. Because there is a stone bank, lining the brook, immediately north of this magnetic anomaly, it was impossible to verify whether or not there was a second, parallel, linear anomaly north of it (as one would expect in case of a military double ditch). The observation that it showed up clearly in a magnetometer survey may indicate a ditch with ceramic building material in its fill. If so, at least the uppermost ditch fill must date to well within the civilian period, as no ceramic building material was used in the military phase. However, this observation is compatible with the theory of a construction in the military as well as in the civilian period. In the latter case, it is possible that the southern ditches of the main fortress were slightly further north in the area of the Gagle Brook or the stone bank south of it, where they would be undetectable. Alternatively, they could have been incorporated in, and thus have been partially or completely destroyed by, later civilian ditches or the bed of the Gagle Brook. A range of other straight linear low resistance (Fig 39) and high magnetic anomalies were detected between the brook and the railway. Some of them may be Roman drainage ditches, property boundaries or ditches lining minor side roads, as is suggested by the fact that their alignment is parallel, or at a right angle, to that of the Alchester-Dorchester road and to the Roman town walls. The date of some linear features at an oblique angle to the above is less certain. None of these other features has the appearance of a military double-ditch which thus, almost certainly, was towards the north end of the meadow, whether or not the above-mentioned high magnetic anomaly was part of it.

Acknowledgements

We are indebted to the Miller family for their kind permission to excavate and to carry out this survey, their help, support and enthusiasm, as well as to our generous sponsors: the British Academy, the Marc Fitch Fund, the Royal Archaeological Institute, the Roman Research Trust, the T.W. Greene Fund of the Craven Committee, the Administrators of the Haverfield Bequest and the Association for Roman Archaeology. Without the diligent and hard work of numerous participants in the excavations, none of this would have been possible.

A dedicated team took part in the survey, most notably Roger and Sally Ainslie of Abingdon Archaeological Geophysics, Seren Griffiths and James Ratcliffe, who also processed the results.

Trench 41, where the inscription was found, was professionally supervised by Steve Boscott, Gill Cox, James Ratcliffe and Steve Usher-Wilson. Steve Boscott, Deepinder Cheema, Ralph Brown, Bob Hooke, Andrew Horrell, Daniel Prior and Josefine Rohs found fragments of the tombstone. Deepinder Cheema and Paula Bryars spent several days looking at thousands of stones from all sides, to make sure that we did not miss any fragment, and found indeed some important smaller missing parts whilst doing so.

References

Hassall, M W C 2001: 'Inscription', in Booth, P M, Evans, J and Hiller, J, *Excavations in the Extramural Settlement of Roman Alchester, Oxfordshire, 1991*, Oxford Archaeology Monographs 1, Oxford, 253.

RIB = *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain.*

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

The Ridgeway and Vale Project: Excavations at Marcham/Frilford 2004.

C. Gosden, G. Lock and P. Daly (with contributions by Richard Bailey, David Bukach, Hannah Fluck, Jane Harrison, Zena Kemash, Mike Langford, Paula Levick, Helen Lewis, Jedrzej Majewski, Sheila Raven, Jane Smallridge, Peter Warry, Carole Wheeler, and Steve Yates)

Introduction to the Ridgeway and Vale Project

The background to the project and site has been detailed in previous interim reports in South Midlands Archaeology (Lock *et. al.* 2002; Lock *et. al.* 2003; Lock *et. al.* 2004).

As in previous years the excavation acts as a training excavation for Oxford University students, and is